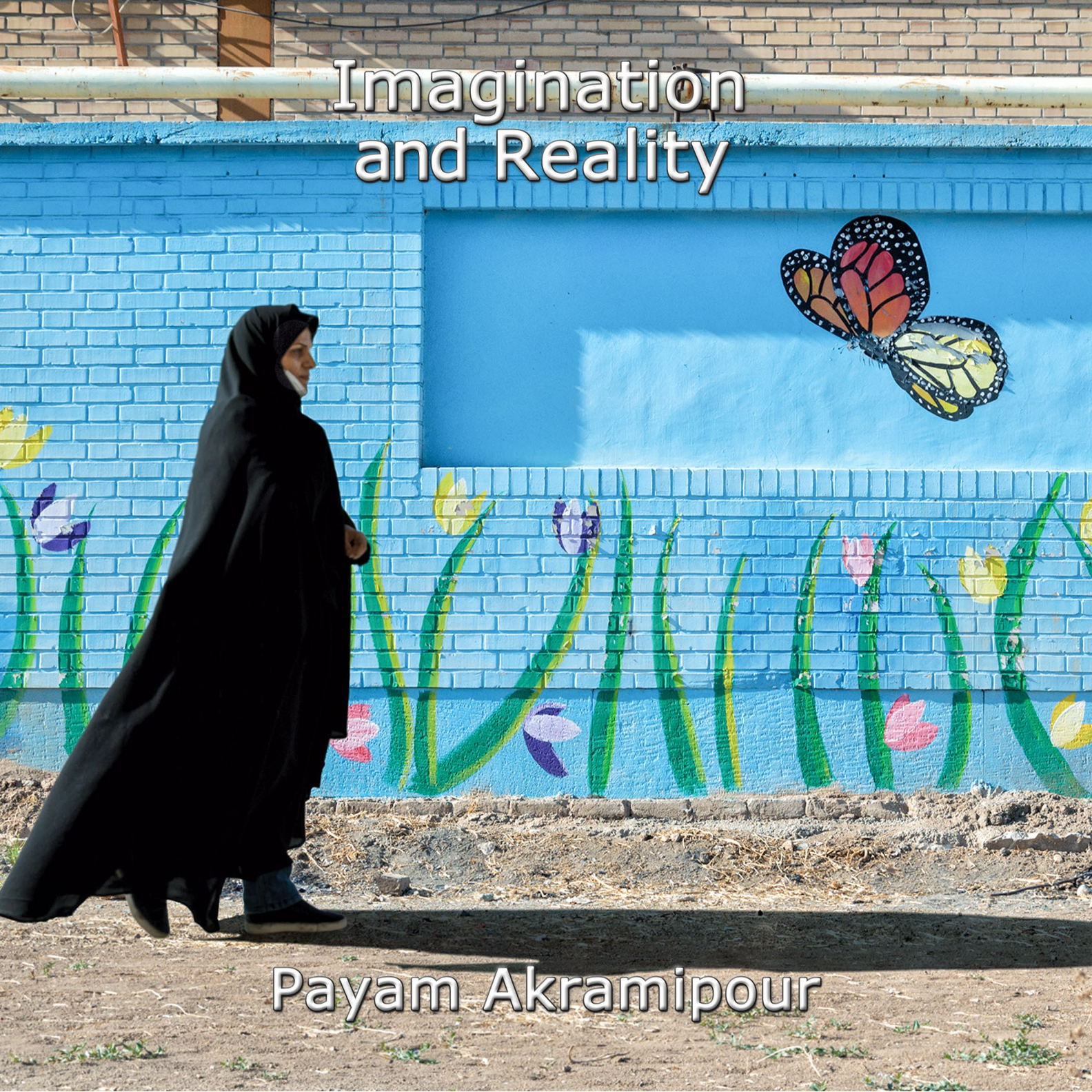
Imagination and Reality



Payam Akramipour

Cover: *Folded Wings, Broken Wings, ©Payam Akramipour*

From his home in Kermanshah, Iran, artist-photographer Payam Akramipour created this portfolio in the months before January's protests, the murder of thousands, and the government's shutdown of all communication with the outside world. Rather than shots of the bodybags and mayhem in the streets, this work documents daily life for Iranians before, from inside the propaganda enclosure in which the Shia theocracy has wrapped the country and in which the violence erupted. For over forty-five years, Iran's rulers have promised citizens improved worldly and spiritual lives, using countless propaganda murals proclaiming security, freedom, prosperity, and paradise; but, to exhausted citizens who pass without looking, the walls are ironic but eloquent reminders tracing only abandoned promises.

Akramipour's photography becomes a method of noticing what has been normalized, overlooked, or deliberately hidden and calling attention to the gap between promise and experience, between painted futures and present struggles. On the street, the supposedly inspirational images engage with their opposites, including children abandoning education for work, elderly people collecting waste to survive, women navigating compulsory veiling, environmental destruction from land seizure and uncontrolled development, and pervasive social dissatisfaction. By positioning ordinary bodies alongside monumental imagery, the work exposes how power functions not only through spectacle but through its infiltration of daily space. The artist doesn't seek to explain or solve these contradictions but to witness them, creating a visual record of how ideology manifests in physical space and how people try to navigate that space with varying degrees of compliance, resistance, and quiet resignation.

The Iranian government enforces strict laws mandating the wearing of the hijab. As a result, women are required to adhere to Islamic dress codes, including mantos and veils, limiting their ability to express their beliefs about fundamental freedoms. In their pursuit of rights, Iranian women have paid the price of freedom with their blood, knowing that resistance is the only path to achieving equality.

نای چی جوان و چی کونگ

Waste collectors in Iran do not have a decent or dignified life. They are forced to wear worn-out clothes, sometimes even old military uniforms discarded by soldiers. Pushing heavy trolleys through the streets, they work tirelessly from dawn to dusk, clinging to the hope of a better future.

My Trolley

Despite the devastating consequences of war, it has often been portrayed beautifully in various forms of media. As a result, the media have played a pivotal role in shaping perceptions of war. In some countries, walls and billboards are adorned with colorful depictions of war, yet life goes on, and people continue to witness the lasting impact of these old conflicts.

Over the past decades, trees in Iran have been cut down and destroyed in large numbers without any boundaries, so that the authorities could claim endless stretches of land for building skyscrapers. Authorities rush past nature, while the trees behind them fall one by one.

Fallen Trees

In my country, the elderly do not bend under the weight of age, but under the crushing burden of life's hardships. Their backs are hunched not by time, but by survival. Even their shadows, those final traces of self, vanish beneath the heavy load they carry.

In a country where even shadows cannot bear the weight of hardship, a dignified old age remains only in paintings.

The Lost Shadow

Iranian women are required to follow strict laws regarding the hijab, imposed due to religious propaganda and family traditions. As a result, they must wear a hijab, such as a black veil or a manto. Although they have been unable to freely express their opinions for over 40 years, they have continued their struggle for freedom, despite many obstacles.

They move toward freedom even with folded or broken wings.

Folded Wings, Broken Wings

وزارت آموزش و پرورش
اداره کل آموزش و پرورش استان کرمانشاه
مدیریت آموزش و پرورش ناحیه ۳ کرمانشاه
دبستان و پیش دبستانی غیردولتی پسرانه
سروش
دوره اول و دوم
سال تأسیس ۱۳۹۹
۰۸۳-۳۸۳۸۲۸۱۱
۰۹۱۸ ۸۳۴ ۱۹۴۶
اداره آموزش
آموزشگاه علمی آزاد دخترانه
پروین
تأسیس ۱۳۹۲
به بوستان علم و دانش خوش آمدید
موفقیت در همیابکی شماست
گاج
@gaj_kermanshah
۳۸۳۸۲۷۸۳

In Iran, due to government mismanagement, underprivileged children and child laborers cannot afford to attend school. While many billboards, banners, and inscriptions on private and state school walls celebrate achievement and education, showcasing successful students and top teachers, child laborers are forced to walk past them, carrying heavy burdens and abandoning their dreams.

My Flower

اداره کل آموزش و پرورش استان کرمانشاه
مدیریت آموزش و پرورش ناحیه ۳ کرمانشاه
دبیرستان شهید ابوالحسن یاری
دوره اول
تاسیس ۱۳۵۹
دبیرستان قلم
دوره اول متوسطه (نسوان)

The walls of schools display ambitious murals promising a bright future for children. Yet these are children who, instead of holding books, hold mirrors and glass-cleaning tools; not shaping their future, but securing today’s bread.

This image shows the presence of a high school and child laborers alongside a sculpture that shouts "ما" in Persian, which means "we" in English. My reflection in the mirror completes the collective awareness of "we," a group that can only witness this reality.

The high school bears two plaques with the names "Ghalam" and "Martyr Abolhassan Yari," one of the martyrs of the Iran-Iraq war. A school that steers its students more toward martyrdom than toward the pen.

Success Behind Closed Doors

برجمال محمد صلوات
هُوَ الفَتاحُ العَليم

These days, we humans are endlessly erasing nature and replacing it with our own creations. We move forward, surrounding ourselves with cars and buildings, while adorning our walls with painted images of the nature we have lost. Perhaps this diminished beauty on concrete surfaces is our last attempt to erase the traces of our own destruction from the face of the earth.

We travel through an imagined road in an artificial world, moving toward the lost beauty and wellness that once truly existed.

A Veneer of Nature

Islamist rulers have for years promised people paradise and a better life both in this earthly world and the spiritual one. People spend their days and nights consumed by thoughts of reaching this promised paradise, only to face closed doors and an uncertain future.

A nowhere land whose end holds no place for these people.

A Closed Door to an Uncertain Paradise

Flags were meant to symbolize unity but in a land where signs are worn and flags have torn apart it is the people who give meaning to the symbols not those emblems that collapsed long ago under the weight of injustice and lost identity. When identity retreats into shadow all that remains is the resilience of those who still stand.

They are the true emblem of their nation.

The Flag Without a Sign

Artists Interview - Payam Akramipour

Photography was not your first art. Right?

My engagement with art began through learning the tanbur, and later I studied the tar and setar seriously. I reached a point where, in my hometown of Kermanshah, there was little left for me to learn at an advanced level. As a result, I moved to Tehran to study with Keivan Saket, one of Iran's most respected tar and setar musicians, in order to deepen my technical skills and academic understanding. After some time, I also attended piano

Payam Akramipour

performance and vocal training classes, as I have a strong interest in Western music. This interest was one of the reasons I chose Keivan Saket as a mentor, since alongside Iranian music, he possesses extensive knowledge and experience in Western musical traditions.

In parallel, I was deeply involved in martial arts. I trained seriously in kung fu, where I obtained a coaching certificate, achieved second dan rank, and won several top placements in competitions. I also progressed to advanced levels in karate.

You have undertaken photography just as seriously. What caused you to change directions?

Originally, I had no intention of attending university. I believed, as demonstrated by figures such as Keivan Saket and other artists

who never pursued formal higher education, that one could still become highly skilled and intellectually grounded without a university degree. My first contact with photography was practical rather than academic. I needed have a portrait taken to accompany a piece of music I had composed and I approached several studios, including one in Kermanshah, managed by Hadi Parvizi. Gradually, through this process, I developed a genuine interest in photography. I asked Mr. Parvizi to teach me photography so I could eventually establish my own studio. He sent me to Majid Pakray instead, emphasizing his extensive knowledge and experience.

How did you decide to take the University path? A big jump from studying studio photography as a trade.

Mr. Pakray strongly encouraged me to pursue higher education. Although I initially resisted, he reiterated during my first private lessons that, despite private teaching being far more financially beneficial for him, university education would open far greater opportunities for me in the long term. While studying for my bachelor's degree, I simultaneously ran a photography studio and prepared intensively for the highly competitive master's entrance exam. During this period, Mr. Pakray advised me to step away from studio work and focus fully on my academic future, emphasizing the long-term value of advanced study.

How do you explain the contrast between your initial attitude about higher education and your eventual enthusiam?

During my school years, I did not feel connected to the formal education system or to the fragmented and unrelated subjects being taught, and this deeply frustrated me. At that time, my strongest interests were in sports and the arts. In our school system, art education was largely reduced to simple drawing: students were encouraged to draw whatever they wanted on a blank sheet of paper, and receiving a high grade—19 or 20—was

almost guaranteed. This reflected a broader lack of serious attention to art education. This approach stands in sharp contrast to countries such as England, where art and music are addressed in more structured and meaningful ways within schools.

I entered university at around the age of twenty-two. From the very beginning, the photography exercises assigned to us were deeply engaging for me. Early on, I worked on physiograms, including one piece created through laser light painting. Each assignment I completed gave me a genuine sense of progress and fulfillment, rather than feeling like a mere obligation.

How does university education work in Iran? How does one qualify? Nomination? Exams? How does one prepare?

After completing a high school diploma in agriculture, I earned a diploma from the University of Culture and Art in Kermanshah in advertising photography. Undergraduate studies, technical courses such as camera systems, studio practice, and software training were highly influential. In addition, theoretical texts on photographers, semiotics, styles, and visual analysis played an important role in shaping my understanding. I sat for the national entrance examination and was accepted into the master's program in photography at the University of Tehran, which is considered one of Iran's most prestigious universities in several fields, including the arts.

Higher education in the US is very expensive, often involving student debt. How does that compare to Iran?

In Iran, university education is also costly, particularly in fields such as photography where equipment expenses are very high. Some universities, including the University of Tehran where I was accepted, are classified as public universities. Admission to public universities requires achieving a competitive rank in the

national entrance examination. Acceptance into a public university typically exempts students from paying tuition, and accommodation and meal costs are significantly reduced. If a student's rank is slightly lower, tuition fees are required and housing and dining costs increase, and the degree may carry slightly less academic prestige.

Bazaar

In the year I took the entrance exam, only four students nationwide were able to study photography at the University of Tehran without paying tuition, and I was one of those four. The scope and volume of the national exam are extremely extensive and demanding. In addition to advanced theoretical and technical photography topics, the exam includes specialized specialized and general language sections, as well as questions on Iranian and global culture and art. Topics range from Paleolithic cave paintings to video art, music, sculpture, and graphic design.

All of us owe our success to mentors and inspirations. Yours?

My foundational understanding of photography during my bachelor's studies was shaped by Majid Pakray. He was the only instructor whose teaching I fully trusted during that

period. In his classes, he taught both technical and theoretical concepts clearly and paid particular attention to implicit meanings in photographs, something that many others overlooked. His emphasis on moving beyond superficial interpretations of images was especially meaningful to me.

At the master's level, I studied under several outstanding professors at the University of Tehran. Courses such as research in visual culture proved especially productive. Studying at the University of Tehran and engaging with carefully selected and substantial academic resources during my master's program significantly advanced my scholarly development. This helped me approach research topics more precisely and purposefully, which was invaluable for my thesis work and for learning how to conduct rigorous academic research. I devoted a great deal of time to research, which allowed me to learn proper research methodologies. I learned how to draw on the writings of thinkers such as Michel Foucault, Ferdinand de Saussure, Stuart Hall, and others to analyze visual images in a structured and critical way.

You teach and mentor others. What do you like about it? Is there a down side? Have you been a juror or exhibit organizer?

I am very interested in teaching because it allows me to share analyses that emerge from my own thinking and to offer students perspectives that go beyond standard textbooks. Many subjects that are deeply engaging and closely connected to our culture and artistic practices require interdisciplinary analysis, yet they are largely absent from photography books.

So far, I have not served as a juror. Regarding juries, I should say that the situation here is quite unusual. You often see university lecturers or translators who, in terms of participation in serious art festivals, do not have strong or substantial CVs. Some of them have not received any recognition

from reputable festivals, yet they are selected as jurors simply because they are senior figures, members of academic faculty, or well known within institutional networks. In practice, selection is often based on status, institutional affiliation, or personal connections rather than demonstrated artistic or curatorial experience.

As a teacher and critic, are you a "tough sell?" What do you look for in student products and new work you encounter?

This is a challenging question to answer myself. However, I remember students often saying that I am demanding and that I pay close attention to details in their work. They also mentioned that I assign a significant amount of work. I believe this rigor helps students take their practice seriously and encourages them to think more critically about their images rather than settling for quick or superficial results.

When I encounter an image, I analyze it from multiple perspectives. I consider whether the subject itself has the potential to be developed. If so, I examine whether the technical and theoretical aspects have been handled properly. I ask whether the photographer could have produced a stronger

image using the same available conditions. I also consider whether sufficient thought has been given to the title or whether it is vague and underdeveloped. Language plays a crucial role in how a photograph is communicated. Even a strong image becomes vulnerable if it lacks a thoughtful title and text. For me, articulating implicit meanings within images is far more important than merely capturing moments. Leonardo da Vinci famously said, “Learn how to see. Realize that everything connects to everything else.” I consider this statement deeply significant. How can one create meaningful artistic work in photography or cinema without understanding historical or social contexts?

Your work is overtly political. It challenges the status quo, your message is strongly anti-government, perhaps anti-clerical. How do you work within the Shia government's stringent limits?

In Iran, it is difficult to address conceptual themes without ther intersecting with broader social realities, whether the subject is poverty or environmental issues. These concerns are deeply interconnected. In the past, I held exhibitions locally, but I now prefer to participate in international photography festivals as a way of presenting my work and communicating my ideas.

The conditions here can encourage critical perspectives and push individuals away from passive viewpoints. For example, I remember the elderly man featured in my photograph "The Lost Shadow." I was walking when I could clearly hear his labored breathing caused by asthma from several meters away. Some people are unable to afford medication, while others obtain it only with great difficulty and external assistance. I remember thinking that with such a low quality of life, this person might not even survive another ten days. Similarly, working children whose feet are

marked by pollution and dirt beneath worn sandals compete with one another for minimal assistance instead of experiencing a childhood. Typically, cultural shock is associated with entering a foreign country, but for me, cultural shock occurs here. It is a deeply unsettling environment.

How pervasive is government interference? Have you been censored? How have you changed your behavior as a result?

I have repeatedly heard of and witnessed situations in which exhibition permits are denied, or granted and then suddenly revoked. In some cases, groups enter exhibitions and remove photographs, or physically damage the prints. Similar actions have occurred during officially permitted music concerts, where power has been cut or performances abruptly stopped.

I recall when I produced a photographic series on the bazaar and held a solo exhibition at the University of Culture and Art in Kermanshah. A radio host interviewed me, but during the broadcast, the core concept of my work was completely altered. My project focused on the closure of the bazaar during the religious ceremonies of Tasua and Ashura and the underlying meanings associated with that event, yet the interview reframed the work in a way that was disconnected from its original intent. It often felt as though the goal was simply to conduct an interview as a formality, without any genuine engagement with the content. Discussing a heavy and somber black and white photographic series in a radio program that plays cheerful morning music beforehand, and reducing it to a vague statement that photographs were taken of the bazaar, strips the work of its meaning and context.

Images in this serie fits both street and documentary-style parameters but other work is very different. What guides you?

Whenever a subject captures my attention and occupies my mind, I begin working on it. I ask myself whether it can be

developed, how it should be approached, and whether it has the potential to become a cohesive photographic series. A critical perspective guides these decisions.

In the past, I have worked on projects very different from this one. For example, in the series "A Few Second Reflections," I took a critical view of Iranian architecture by photographing distorted reflections of buildings on the surface of soap bubbles. Fragile structures that could collapse at any moment appeared warped and unstable within bubbles that lasted only a few seconds. While those buildings and bubbles were temporary, the images themselves remain permanent.

From "A Few Second Reflections"

The works in this series are both documentary and not documentary. Some of the images are documentary, while others involve subjects photographed in one location and combined with images of wall paintings from another place. Whether documentary photographs or photomontages, they reflect lived realities in Iran. For example, the photograph, "My Trolley," is documentary, while "The Flag Without a Sign" is a photomontage. In that image, not only the subject but also the flags on the wall are constructed elements. What matters is not whether a person actually passed through that space, but

whether such a concept exists and whether the image reflects a real aspect of the country's condition. For this reason, I did not feel it was necessary to wait for someone to pass by at a specific moment. Sometimes this happened naturally and I pressed the shutter, and at other times I used photomontage techniques. Conceptually, this approach is justified.

What sort of critical reactions has your work received? Any reviews that were particularly meaningful, thought-provoking?

The feedback that has motivated me the most has come from university professors who showed genuine interest in my work. They encouraged me and offered thoughtful critiques. At times, non-specialists have also encountered my images, and when I explained the meanings behind them, they were deeply affected. Academic feedback has been particularly valuable to me, and I have often welcomed critical commentary. Being challenged, revisiting images and texts repeatedly, and refining them over time is central to my working process.

You publish internationally. Have you found a difference in the ways that your work is received in Iran vs other countries?

I rarely participate in domestic festivals in Iran and focus primarily on international ones. My subjects are often not suited to local festivals, and there is also concern about unauthorized use of ideas. In international contexts, however, I have received very positive responses. I appreciate festivals that prioritize artistic value, conceptual depth, and originality over superficial appearance or the date of production. For me, it is extremely meaningful when evaluators ask whether an image is truly art, whether it reflects genuine thought, and whether it is authentic rather than commercial. The emails and conversations I receive upon acceptance are very encouraging.

The artist's road is long. Political repression in Iran interferes with all international communication. Given that, what's in the future for you?

Thank you very much for your empathy and understanding. The fact that this road has no clear ending is precisely what adds to its beauty and sustains motivation. If there were a definitive end point, the incentive to create something new would gradually disappear. The motivation to continue, therefore, lies in the openness and length of the journey itself —although it undeniably requires persistence, genuine passion, and deep personal concern.

At present, I am focused on strengthening my academic profile and studying the necessary materials for pursuing a doctoral degree in film studies in the United States. I have many works that I have not yet exhibited, but I believe there will be various opportunities to present them in the future. I am very curious to see how international audiences respond to my work. Exhibiting in a new country with a different cultural and artistic context is deeply appealing to me, especially in the United States, where multiple cultures coexist and interact.

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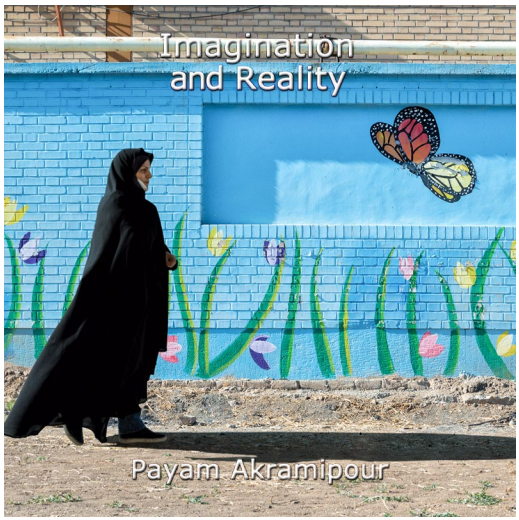

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